

HUD Black History Showcase Series

James Baldwin
1924-1987

Writer, born in Harlem, New York City, the oldest of nine children. His father was a preacher and at the age of 14, Baldwin was also ordained a preacher. At 18 he graduated from Dewitt Clinton High School and at the age of 20 he met Richard Wright, who helped him secure a fellowship to allow Baldwin the freedom to devote himself fully to literature. In 1948 he went to Europe and completed *Go Tell it On the Mountain*, and other major works.

After nine years abroad, Baldwin returned to the United States and developed a reputation as an eloquent literary spokesperson for the civil rights of African Americans. A popular speaker on the lecture circuit, he became increasingly aware of and outraged at the status of civil rights in America. He responded with three powerful books of essays: *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961), *The Fire Next Time* (1963), in which he all but predicts the outbursts of black anger to come, and *More Notes of a Native Son*.

The mid 1960's saw Baldwin's two published plays produced on Broadway, *The Amen Corner* and *Blues for Mr. Charlie*.

The assassinations of Medgar Evers, Martin Luther King Jr., and the black muslim leader Malcolm X—shattered any hopes Baldwin had held for racial reconciliation in the United States, and he returned to France in the early 1970's. His later works of fiction include *If Beale Street Could Talk*, *Just Above My Head*, and others. Non-fiction works included *No Name In The Street* and *The Devil Finds Work*. A volume of poetry, *Jimmy's Blues*, was issued in 1985.

James Baldwin's greatest achievement as a writer was his ability to address American race relations from a psychological perspective. In his essays and fiction he explored the implications of racism for both the oppressed and the oppressor suggesting that all people suffer in a racist environment. His fiction and plays also explore the burdens a callous society can impose on a sensitive individual.

James Baldwin remained abroad much of the last fifteen years of his life, but he never gave up his American citizenship. The citizens of France nevertheless embraced Baldwin as one of their own, and in 1986 he was accorded one of the country's highest accolades when he was named Commander of the Legion of Honor. He died of stomach cancer in 1987 and was buried in Harlem, New York City.